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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to study the effects of different statements regarding confidentiality (absolute; limited; nondirective) on subject impressions of interviewers. In addition, the professional affiliation of the interviewer was manipulated (psychologist, minister/pastoral counselor, social worker) to assess potential influence of the interviewer's occupational identity. Finally, a dual interviewer stimulus design was used to evaluate the generalizability of any obtained results. Male (N=62) and female (N=141) undergraduates at a large southwestern university completed the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale prior to the experimental manipulations. Dependent measures included the Counselor Rating Form and ratings of other interviewer-relevant items. All main or interaction effects involving confidentiality and professional affiliation were significant. Significant main effects emerged for interviewers on measures of attractiveness, the ability to help clients, and willingness to help clients. Additional research into the effects of discussions regarding different confidentiality conditions on client perceptions of interviewers needs to be conducted. (Author/ABL)

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Confidentiality and Professional Affiliation Effects on Subject Ratings of Interviewers

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Presented at the meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association, Houston, TX, April, 1989.

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Abstract

The primary purpose of the present research was to study the effects of different statements regarding confidentiality (absolute; limited; nondirective) on subject impressions of interviewers. In addition, the professional affiliation of the interviewer was manipulated (psychologist; minister-pastoral counselor; social worker) to assess potential influence of the interviewer's occupational identity. Finally, a dual interviewer stimulus design was used to evaluate the generalizability of any obtained results. Sixty-two male and 141 female undergraduates at a large southwestern university completed the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale (Fischer & Turner, 1970) prior to the experimental manipulations. Dependent measures included the Counselor Rating Form (LaCrosse & Barak, 1976) and ratings of other interviewer-relevant items. All main or interaction effects involving confidentiality and professional affiliation were significant. Significant main effects emerged for interviewers on measures of attractiveness, the ability to help clients, and willingness to help clients. Implications and limitations of the present findings were discussed, as were suggestions for future research.

Confidentiality and Professional Affiliation Effects on Subject Ratings of Interviewers

In recent years, increased professional attention has been directed toward the importance of informing clients of potential limitations to confidentiality in counseling and psychotherapy (Denkowski & Denkowski, 1982; Everstine, Everstine, Heymann, True, Frey, Johnson, & Seiden, 1980; Keith-Spiegel & Koocher, 1985; McGuire, Toal, & Blau, 1985; VandeCreek, Miars, & Herzog, 1987; Woods & McNamara, 1980). As Woods and McNamara (1980) stated, "By being given all the relevant information regarding the therapy situation, an individual will be in a better situation to assess the rewards and costs attendant to entering and continuing in therapy" (p. 720).

In spite of such calls for the routine discussion of potential confidentiality limitations with clients and prospective clients, evidence indicates that no uniform professional practice currently exists relative to this topic (Baird & Rupert, 1987). While a variety of factors may contribute to this state of affairs, the potential deleterious effects of such discussions on the relationship between therapist and client would appear to be of significant concern.

Research by Miller and Thelen (1986) revealed that a majority of subjects indicated that confidentiality is maintained "to facilitate the therapeutic relationship (e.g., 'to maintain

trust')" (p. 18). Such evidence suggests that the professional who discusses possible confidentiality limitations may inadvertently hinder the subsequent development of an effective working relationship with clients.

Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983) provide additional evidence to suggest possible adverse effects of nonconfidentiality on subject perceptions of counselor trustworthiness. Based on Strong's (1968) interpersonal influence counseling model, Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983) studied the effects of nonconfidentiality, confidentiality, and control conditions on subject ratings of counselors. The study utilized an audiotape analogue of an initial counseling interview in which the client portrayed either a high or moderate degree of problem severity. "Counselors who breached confidentiality in cases involving highly serious problems were perceived as less trustworthy" (Merluzzi & Brischetto, 1983, p. 250). As noted by Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983), "Apparently, subjects believed that confidentiality was important with problems of a very serious nature and less critical with moderately serious problems" (p. 250). Interestingly, no significant differences were found for trustworthiness scores between subjects in the confidential and control conditions.

The Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983) research also revealed other less favorable evaluations of the counselor in the nonconfidential condition relative to both the confidential and

control group counselor conditions. Subjects rated the nonconfidential counselor as significantly less able to understand the client's problem, expected a less favorable outcome from counseling with the nonconfidential counselor, and were less likely to refer a friend for counseling with the nonconfidential counselor. Again, no significant differences were reported for these measures between the confidential and control condition counselors. Finally, for more severe client difficulties, counselors who maintained confidentiality were rated as more attractive than nonconfidential condition counselors.

Such findings are consistent with the view that limited confidentiality can adversely impact client perceptions of the counselor. However, the Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983) study did not directly address the issue of the effects of routine discussions with the client of potential limitations to confidentiality in counseling. Rather, counselors in the experimental conditions of the Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983) research decided to either actually violate or maintain the client's confidentiality subsequent to the counseling interview. Further, such decisions were portrayed as being reached apart from any discussion with the client in question.

In light of this, the present study was designed to directly address the effects of interviewer-client discussions of potential limits to confidentiality on subject perceptions of the

interviewer. Interviewers provided clients with absolute, limited, or nondirective statements regarding confidentiality during the course of an analogue initial interview. The limited confidentiality condition reflected current American Psychological Association ethical guidelines (APA, 1981), and listed threats of harm to self or others as the relevant limits to confidentiality.

The present research also evaluated the influence of interviewers' professional affiliations (psychologist, minister-pastoral counselor, and social worker). Of particular interest was the possibility that the professional affiliation of the interviewer might differentially impact subject perceptions under the various confidentiality conditions.

Finally, similar to the Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983), the present investigation included two separate portrayals of the interviewer role for each confidentiality and professional affiliation condition. The dual interviewer stimulus design was employed in order to evaluate the generalizability of any obtained significant findings across nonspecific interviewer characteristics.

Method

Subjects

A total of 203 students at a large southwestern university participated as subjects in the study. Of this total, 62 were male and 141 were female. All subjects participated on a

voluntary basis, and all were eligible to receive extra course credit for taking part in the research.

Materials

Three scripts were developed which presented an analogue of approximately the first 12 minutes of an initial counseling interview. Two doctoral level psychologists alternated acting the roles of client and interviewer for each of three confidentiality conditions, yielding six tapes. With the exception of the specific references to confidentiality embedded in each tape, the interviewer-client dialogue was held constant across all vignettes.

As discussed above, three confidentiality conditions were employed in the study. In the nondirective condition, the client's concerns about confidentiality were acknowledged by the interviewer, but no specific information regarding confidentiality limits was provided. In the absolute confidentiality condition, the client's confidentiality concerns were responded to with assurances that everything discussed within the interview setting would remain absolutely confidential. Finally, in the limited confidentiality condition the client's questions regarding confidentiality were answered with assurances that, with the possible exceptions of threats of harm to self or others, all information would remain confidential.

Measures

Prior to the experimental manipulation, each subject completed a biographical questionnaire and the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale (ATSPH; Fischer & Turner, 1970). The ATSPH was employed to assess subjects' attitudes regarding receiving professional psychological services. Higher scores on the 29 items ATSPH indicate a more positive attitude toward help getting.

Several dependent measures were utilized. First, subjects completed the 36 item version of the Counselor Rating Form (CRF; LaCrosse & Barak, 1976). The CRF is composed of opposing pairs of adjectives rated in a semantic differential format and is designed to assess subject perceptions of three counselor characteristics: expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness (Barak & LaCrosse, 1975; LaCrosse & Barak, 1976). Higher scores indicated a more favorable impression.

Second, subjects were asked to rate the likelihood that the interviewer heard in the tape would be of help in dealing with 20 personal problems: general anxiety or nervousness, an alcohol problem, shyness, a problem with sexual functioning, depression, conflicts with parents, difficulties in dating, choosing a career, having trouble sleeping, a drug addiction problem, feelings of inferiority, anxiety about taking tests in school, difficulties making friends, have trouble studying, marriage difficulties, lack of assertiveness, homosexuality/lesbianism,

unwanted pregnancy, religious conflict, and "losing grip" on reality. Of these 20 items, 14 were previously studied by Cash, Begley, McCown, and Weise (1975). Of the remaining 6 items, 4 were added by Lewis, Davis, and Lesmeister (1983), while Schneider (1985) provided 2 additional items. For each of the items, subjects rated the interviewer's perceived helpfulness on a 1 to 6 scale. Higher scores indicated greater confidence that the interviewer would be helpful in dealing with a particular problem area.

Third, subjects' perceptions of the interviewer's knowledge of psychology, ability to help clients, and willingness to help clients were assessed. Each of the above qualities was rated on a 1 to 7 scale for each of three pairs of adjectives: good versus bad, valuable versus worthless, and meaningful versus meaningless. Lower scores on each of the items indicated positive evaluation of the interviewer.

Fourth, subjects provided a global rating of the degree of optimism regarding the general helpfulness of the interviewer, and estimated the probability that the subject would return for a second interview. Additionally, subjects rated the likelihood of recommending the interviewer to a friend in need of counseling services. Each of these items were rated on a 1 to 8 scale, with higher scores indicative of more favorable interviewer evaluations (Cash & Kehr, 1978; Lewis & Walsh, 1980; Schneider, 1985).

Finally, subjects responded to several items as validity checks of the experimental conditions. The validity check items asked subjects to indicate whether or not the interviewer in the tape discussed confidentiality, and to indicate if the interviewer in question was a psychologist, a minister-pastoral counselor, or a social worker.

Design and Procedure

The present study employed a 3 (absolute, limited, and nondirective confidentiality) x 2 (interviewers A and B) x 3 (psychologist, minister-pastoral counselor, and social worker) design.

Subjects were tested in small groups of no more than 5. Subjects were permitted to select from a variety of experimental test sessions. The sequence of administration for the confidentiality and professional affiliation conditions was randomized for each session, while the interviewer condition was counterbalanced using an ABBA, BAAB design. Once a minimum of 10 subjects had completed the study for a particular research cell, that cell was eliminated from the selection process. This procedure was continued until a minimum of 10 subjects had participated in each treatment combination.

In the pre-experimental phase, subjects completed the biographical information sheet and the ATSPH. Pre-tape instructions adapted from the expert introduction employed by Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983) were read to introduce one of the

three counseling professionals while holding the experience level constant across all conditions. The instructions stated: "You are about to hear the beginning of an initial interview conducted by Robert Doran, who is a (Psychologist/ minister and pastoral/ social worker) engaged in private practice. In addition to his extensive training and experience, he has published a book entitled Innovative Approaches to Helping Others. At the conclusion of the tape, you will be asked to complete questionnaires giving your impression of the interviewer. As you listen to the tape, please try to assume the role of the client."

After reading the introduction, the experimenter played one of six audiocassette tapes. The specific tape played was determined according to participants' cell assignment and presented either interviewer A or B under one of the three confidentiality conditions, absolute, limited, or nondirective confidentiality).

Subsequent to listening to the tape, subjects completed questionnaires which included the various dependent measures and manipulation check items.

Results

Preliminary X^2 analyses of potentially confounding group differences were conducted. The distribution of males and females across all cells was nonsignificant ($x^2 = 21.48$, $df = 17$, $p > .05$) as were the proportions of subjects with and without prior experience with psychiatric, psychological, or counseling

services (χ^2 = 9.16, df = 17, p > .05). However, statistical analysis of the ATSPH premeasure revealed a significant confidentiality condition by therapist type interaction (F = 2.73, df = 4, 184, p < .05). No other significant main or interaction effects were found on the ATSPH premeasure. Given the significant correlations between the ATSPH scale and the majority of the dependent measures employed co-variance techniques using the ATSPH as a covariate were used to examine the dependent measures.

Table 1 presents the results of a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA; Norusis, 1985) of the CRF expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness scores. The only significant effect involved the interviewers.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Table 2 presents the univariate F tests for interviewers on the CRF factors and indicates that the interviewers differed only with respect to attractiveness. Interviewer A (adjusted M = 62.39) was seen as more attractive than interviewer B (adjusted M = 58.40).

MANCOVA results for the 20 specific personal problem items are presented in Table 3. No significant main or interaction effects emerged for subjects' ratings of the interviewers' perceived helpfulness relative to the problem areas addressed.

Insert Table 3 about here

MANCOVA results for subject ratings of the interviewer's knowledge of psychology, ability to help clients, and willingness to help clients are presented in Table 4. The findings indicate a significant main effect for interviewers only. Univariate *F*

Insert Tables 4 and 5 about here

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tests of the interviewer's knowledge of psychology, ability to help clients, and willingness to help clients (see Table 5) indicated that the two interviewers differed in regard to both the ability to help clients and willingness to help clients. Interviewer A was rated as having more ability to help clients (adjusted *M* = 8.03), and as being more willing to help clients (adjusted *M* = 6.62) than interviewer B (adjusted *M*s = 9.30 and 7.81, respectively).

Table 6 presents MANCOVA results for subjects' ratings of optimism regarding the interviewer's general helpfulness, the probability that the subject would return for a second interview, and the probability that the subject would refer a friend to the interviewer. No main or interaction effects reached significance.

Insert Table 6 about here

Analyses of responses to two items designed to evaluate participants' awareness of the relevant experimental conditions were also conducted. First, 90.6 percent of all subjects indicated the interviewer discussed confidentiality during the course of the interview. Across the legal, complete, and nondirective conditions, the percentages of subjects indicating that the interviewer discussed confidentiality were 88, 95, and 88, respectively. Finally, subjects were asked to indicate the professional affiliation of the interviewer. Totals for psychologist, minister-pastoral counselor, and social worker were 116, 51, and 35, respectively. A chi-square analysis of the obtained results was significant ($\chi^2 = 54.66$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). Inspection of Table 7 indicates that subjects in both the

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Insert Table 7 about here

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minister-pastoral counselor and social worker conditions tended to misidentify the interviewer's professional affiliation. While subjects in the psychologist condition tended to be more accurate in identifying the interviewer's professional affiliation, 5 of 68 subjects incorrectly reported that the interviewer heard on the audiotape was a social worker.

Discussion

The present study investigated the effects of different confidentiality conditions on subject perceptions of interviewers. In contrast to the Merluzzi and Brischetto (1983) study, the confidentiality conditions employed in the present research did not involve an actual decision by the interviewer to either maintain or violate the confidentiality of the client. Rather, the interviewers provided absolute, limited, or nondirective statements regarding confidentiality during the course of an initial interview in response to expressed client concerns. The distinction is important relative to the current topic of interest, i.e., does defining potential limits to confidentiality differentially impact subjects' perceptions of the professional. On the basis of Merluzzi & Brischetto's (1983) work, it was anticipated that interviewers in the limited confidentiality condition would be rated significantly less favorably than interviewers in either the absolute or nondirective confidentiality conditions while no differences were anticipated between the absolute and nondirective conditions. In view of current calls in the professional literature for such therapist-client discussions (e.g., Keith-Spiegel & Koocher, 1985), nonsignificant findings may be reassuring to professionals concerned with potential deleterious effects of those discussions on the therapist-client relationship. However, the obtained results must be interpreted in light of two key considerations

First, even though a sizable proportion (approximately 47 percent) of the participants reported some form of prior psychiatric, psychological, or counseling contact, it cannot be assumed that regard for confidentiality treated in an analogue paradigm is equivalent to concern for confidentiality relative to actual counseling clients. Thus, caution is warranted regarding the generalizability of the present findings to actual counseling settings (Kazdin, 1980).

Second, while the majority of subjects in all conditions correctly indicated that they heard the interviewer discuss confidentiality during the interview, a follow-up question addressing subjects' awareness of the precise confidentiality specifications (i.e., legal, complete, or nondirective) was not included. Evidence from other research (Kobocow, McGuire, & Blau, 1983) has suggested that subjects may tend to over-report guarantees of confidentiality. The possibility exists that individuals hear what they want, rather than grasp the meaning of what the counselor is telling them. The investigation failed to find any evidence that subjects discriminated among various professionals engaging in counseling as a function of the interviewer's professional identification (i.e., psychologist; minister-pastoral counselor; social worker). The failure to obtain a significant professional affiliation by confidentiality condition interaction is of particular note. The lack of differential ratings of the three professions under the

confidentiality conditions may indicate that subjects assume equivalent confidentiality policies exist for psychologists, minister-pastoral counselors, and social workers. While ethical codes of various professions may regard confidentiality identically, statutes regulating confidentiality rights can vary substantially as a function solely of the professional's title. Statutory specifications in confidentiality vary in significant ways among diverse professions that seem logically related as well as across jurisdictional (i.e., state) boundaries. Such considerations suggest that prospective clients may need to be informed of any profession and jurisdiction specific limits to confidentiality vis-a-vis the counseling context. However, while such a view is consistent with recent interest in such information among professionals (e.g., Keith-Spiegel & Koocher, 1985) and the public (Miller & Thelan, 1986), results from the present study also revealed that the professional affiliation conditions were confounded, with some subjects in each condition misidentifying the counselor's profession. In light of this, any interpretation of the obtained nonsignificant findings must be considered tentative.

Finally, relative to specific research findings, interviewer effects were obtained for counselor attractiveness, ability to help clients, and willingness to help clients. Consistently, interviewer A was rated more favorably than interviewer B. The dual interviewer stimulus design was employed to assess the

generalizability of any significant confidentiality and professional affiliation results. In the absence of any confidentiality or professional affiliation effects, interpretation of the significant interviewer main effects is not considered relevant to the present discussion.

Clearly, additional research into the effects of discussions regarding different confidentiality conditions on client perceptions of interviewers needs to be conducted. Specifically, future studies could attempt to more closely approximate the treatment setting, focus on ways to increase clients' attention to differential specifications of confidentiality, and employ actual clients as subjects whenever feasible in order to increase the generalizability of obtained results (Kazdin, 1980). The findings of such research efforts should serve a valuable function in shaping future professional policy and practice relative to this important topic (Woods & McNamara, 1980).

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Table 1

MANCOVA for CRF Expertness, Attractiveness, and Trustworthiness

Effect	Test	F	DF	Significance
A x B x C	Pillai's	.73	12, 540	.722
B x C	Pillai's	1.02	6, 358	.411
A x C	Pillai's	.86	12, 540	.590
A x B	Pillai's	1.24	6, 358	.284
C	Pillai's	.70	6, 358	.645
B	Pillai's	4.25	3, 178	.006
A	Pillai's	.88	6, 358	.506

Note. A = confidentiality condition; B = interviewer;
C = professional affiliation.

Table 2

Univariate Tests of the CRF Expertness, Attractiveness, and Trustworthiness Scores

CRF Factor	F	DF	Significance
Expertness	.14	1, 180	.714
Attractiveness	6.58	1, 180	.011
Trustworthiness	1.09	1, 180	.297

Table 3

MANCOVA for the 20 Personal Problems

Effect	Test	F	DF	Significance
A x B x C	Pillai's	.84	80, 664	.825
B x C	Pillai's	.77	40, 328	.836
A x C	Pillai's	1.21	80, 664	.114
A x B	Pillai's	.89	40, 328	.663
C	Pillai's	1.17	40, 328	.231
B	Pillai's	.87	20, 163	.620
A	Pillai's	1.14	40, 328	.266

Note. A = confidentiality condition; B = interviewer;
C = professional affiliation.

Table 4

MANCOVA for Interviewer Knowledge of Psychology, Ability to Help Clients, and Willingness to Help Clients

Effect	Test	F	DF	Significance
A x B x C	Pillai's	1.39	12, 549	.167
B x C	Pillai's	.49	6, 364	.816
A x C	Pillai's	.65	12, 549	.802
A x B	Pillai's	.34	6, 364	.918
C	Pillai's	1.18	6, 364	.318
B	Pillai's	3.61	3, 181	.014
A	Pillai's	.88	6, 364	.511

Note. A = confidentiality condition; B = interviewer; C = professional affiliation.

Table 5

Univariate Tests for Interviewer Knowledge of Psychology, Ability to Help Clients, and Willingness to Help Clients

Rating of Interviewer	F	DF	Significance
Knowledge of Psychology	.00	3, 181	.977
Ability to Help Clients	3.99	3, 181	.047
Willingness to Help Clients	4.36	3, 181	.038

Table 6

MANCOVA for Optimism Regarding Helpfulness, Probability of Returning, and Probability of Referring a Friend

Effect	Test	F	DF	Significance
A x B x C	Pillai's	.95	12, 546	.497
B x C	Pillai's	1.74	6, 362	.111
A x C	Pillai's	.93	12, 546	.513
A x B	Pillai's	1.07	6, 362	.380
C	Pillai's	.96	6, 362	.448
B	Pillai's	.93	3, 180	.429
A	Pillai's	.36	6, 362	.906

Note. A = confidentiality condition; B = interviewer; C = professional affiliation.

Table 7

Accuracy of Subjects' Identification of Interviewers' Professional Affiliation

	Experimental Condition		
Subject Report	1	2	3
1	63	15	38
2	0	51	0
3	5	0	30

Note. 1 = psychologist; 2 = minister-pastoral counselor; 3 = social worker.